DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 177 631 CS 502 648

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TITLE Teaching Interpersonal Communication through Literature.
PUB DATE [75]
NOTE 9p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Case Studies (Education); *Communication Skills; *Content Analysis; Higher Education; *Interpersonal Relationship; *Literary Analysis; Literature; *Teaching Techniques
IDENTIFIERS Albee (Edward); Knowles (John)

ABSTRACT

Theories of communication can be applied to case studies in human behavior drawn from short stories, novels, plays, and screenplays, in addition to standard psychological texts and personal experiences of class members. One example is A.H. Maslow's concept of self-actualization exemplified by the character of Phineas in John Knowles' "A Separate Peace"; other examples are the characters in Edward Albee's "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?," who illustrate the concepts of structural analysis, transactional analysis, and interaction ritual. Other insights into human interaction can be illustrated through high quality literature, using the students' ability to relate the narratives to their own life experiences as the primary criterion for literature selection, rather than the students' comprehension level. (AEA)

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TEACHING INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION THROUGH LITERATURE

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TEACHING INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION THROUGH LITERATURE

* Marvin D. Jensen

An introductory collegiate course in interpersonal communication is usually experience-centered. Beyond this introductory level, theory may be explored in a variety of ways. One approach in an advanced course is the application of communication theories to case studies in human behavior. Such cases may be drawn from psychological texts and/or the personal experiences of class members. Another source can be literature--in the form of short stories, novels, plays, and screenplays. One criterion of high quality literature is that it provides insight into reality. Faulkner believed the best writers explore the human spirit, which is "capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance."[1] Following are two examples which suggest how theories of human communication can be explored through literature. These examples are chosen because they can be used to illustrate and clarify the ideas of particular theorists. Each can serve as a reading assignment upon which to base class discussion following a theoretical lecture.

SELF-ACTUALIZATION AND A SEPARATE PEACE

Abraham Maslow's concept of "self-actualization" is an important insight into intrapersonal communication.[2] Many of the characteristics of a self-actualized person, as defined by Maslow, are illustrated in John Knowles' novel A Separate Peace.[3] The reality of the novel is underscored because the events at the fictional Devon Academy seem to closely parallel Knowles' own adolescent experiences at Exeter Academy in New Hampshire.

One characteristic of self-actualization defined by Maslow is reliance on internal evaluations. Phineas in A Separate Peace exemplified this as he charmed the faculty while ignoring their rules, and broke the school

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swimming record without announcing it. He had the ability to meet the standards of others, but chose to follow his own. Maslow also believes the self-actualized person has unusual clarity of perception. Phineas was able to see the reality of his fall from the tree while the views of others were distorted by suspicion or guilt. Phineas accepted the reality that his closest friend had caused his fall, but he also knew that "black moment" was due to personal uncertainty and emotional conflict, not maliciousness. Maslow describes the self-actualized person as one who is receptive to the intensity of peak experiences, both negative and positive. Phineas suffered physically and emotionally, but his realistic confrontation with this suffering enabled him to experience the breakthroughs of moral leadership and unconditional friendship. He is not innocent of the worst of life's blows; thus his enthusiasms and affirmations show character rather than naivete. Maslow also concludes that the self-actualizing person is willing to give up defenses, fully realizing and accepting the risks involved. During their trip to the beach, Phineas declared his friendship for Gene--a nearly suicidal risk in the competitive, self-protective atmosphere of a prep school. But it was precisely that act of conscious vulnerability that Gene later recognized as Phineas' most lasting gift and example. Several of Maslow's other ideas (synergy, choice-making, and total absorption in the present) are also explicitly illustrated in this novel. It does address the struggles and successes of the human spirit, as Faulkner urged.

INTERACTION RITUAL AND WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?

A second example of literature that can be a vehicle for studying human relationships is Edward Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?[4]

This play thoroughly illustrates the concepts of structural analysis and transactional analysis proposed by Eric Berne[5] and T. A. Harris.[6] It can also be a means of exploring the ideas of Erving Goffman, who views much of human interaction as an elaborate series of rituals.[7] He sees rigid patterns in the use of space and describes homes as divided into staging areas and performing areas. Albee's play is set in George and Martha's living room (their performing area) with the peak of conflict occurring when Nick is invited into Martha's bedroom (a staging area usually closed to outsiders). Goffman writes of "teams" who may strongly disagree between themselves, but still unite against outside threat. Even in the midst of attacking each other, George and Martha remain a team--defining the rules and limiting the intrusion of Nick and Honey.

Goffman describes the lack of genuine interpersonal involvement and identifies several forms of psuedo-involvement, each of which is found in this play. "Over-involvement" is illustrated by Honey's hysteria which excuses her from dealing with the reality of the situation. "Auto-involvement" is also demonstrated by Honey as her frequent nausea reveals her exclusive preoccupation with self. "Dis-involvement" sometimes takes the form of "civil inattention," the act of ignoring anything which does not coincide with the expected ritual. Albee provides an excellent example early in his play as Nick and Honey pretend not to have heard Martha's shouted expletive a moment before the door is opened to them. "Simulated involvement" provides a facade which allows escape from genuine involvement. George's simulated involvement (appearing to read a book) absolves him from responding to the behavior of Martha and Nick upstairs. "Side-involvement" enables a person to avoid giving total attention, releasing him from full responsibility. Preoccupation with alcohol provides a side-involvement which allows all four characters in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? to feel less

accountable for their actions and statements.

While illustrating Goffman's descriptions so well, this play also illustrates the possibility of achieving the autonomy from rituals and scripts that Berne believes is possible.[8] The last act (appropriately entitled "Exorcism") concludes with George and Martha achieving genuine mutual involvement--a new relationship, untried and fearful, but hopeful in its freedom from ritual and fantasy.

OTHER THEORIES - OTHER LITERATURE

In addition to the two examples described above, numerous other insights into human interaction can be illustrated through high quality literature.

Charles Hampden-Turner's description of the radical person who creates a center of calm in the midst of chaos,[9] and Viktor Frankl's belief in "the ability to respond"[10] are extensively reflected in the writings of Willa Cather. Cather always emphasized the exceptional, yet possible, person. Among her many relevant works, My Mortal Enemy particularly exemplifies individual resistance to absurdity,[11] and "A Wagner Matinee" underscores the human capacity to respond even after years of emotional and spiritual deprivation.[12]

Frederick Perls' concept of fragmented perception is precisely illustrated in Max Frisch's play Andorra;[13] and his description of being fully present and involved is one of the themes of Robert Pirsig's Zen and the Art of Motocycle Maintenance.[14]

Some of Thomas Gordon's ideas about parent-child communication[15] can be further appreciated when applied to the realistic mother-daughter relationship in Hannah's House by Shelby Hearon.[16]

Many of R. D. Laing's concepts of therapeutic communication[17] are graphically shown in I Never Promised You a Rose Garden.[18] This "novel"

is a nearly autobiographical account of Hannah Green's own experience with Dr. Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, an associate of R. D. Laing.

Finally, much of Carl Rogers' work can be illustrated through literature which traces the process of human beings "becoming" more fully themselves. His recent book Becoming Partners: Marriage and Its Alternatives[19] relates well to May Sarton's portrait of a dissolving marriage in Crucial Conversations.[20]

CONCLUSION

The preceding suggestions are made with a college-level course in mind. However, this approach could be adapted to the secondary level through the selection of alternative literature appropriate to age-level and course content. Each instructor is in the best position to make such selections. The primary criterion for choosing literature is not the students' comprehension level, but their ability to relate the narratives to their own life experiences. For example, A Separate Peace is frequently studied for its literary value in secondary literature courses, but it may be less appropriate for secondary interpersonal communication courses. John Knowles wrote from the point of view of a mature man reflecting on his youth. If this book is to be a means of exploring complex human behavior, the reader must bring to it substantial personal experience and perspective.

At either the secondary or collegiate level, appropriate literature can be more involving than examples drawn from theoretical texts. And true insights can be gained, for the best literature not only mirrors reality--it does justice to the human capacity for compassion, sacrifice, and endurance.

FOOTNOTES

1. William Falkner, "On Accepting the Nobel Prize for Literature," The Faulkner Reader: Selections from the Works of William Faulkner (New York: Random House, Inc., 1953) pp. 3-4.
2. Abraham H. Maslow, The Farther Reaches of Human Nature (New York: Viking Press, 1971).
3. John Knowles, A Separate Peace (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1959).
4. Edward Albee, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1962).
5. Eric Berne, Games People Play (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1964).
6. Thomas A. Harris, I'm OK--You're OK (New York: Harper and Row, Inc., 1967).
7. Erving Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1959).
8. Berne, pp. 178-181.
9. Charles Hampden-Turner, Radical Man (Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman Publishing Co., Inc., 1970).
10. Viktor E. Frankl, Man's Search For Meaning (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959).
11. Willa Cather, My Mortal Enemy (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1926).
12. Willa Cather, "A Wagner Matinee," Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction 1892-1912 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970) pp. 235-242.
13. Max Frisch, Andorra (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961).

14. Robert M. Pirsig, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1974).

15. Thomas Gordon, Parent Effectiveness Training (New York: Peter H. Wyden, Inc., 1970).

16. Shelby Hearon, Hannah's House (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1975).

17. R. D. Laing, Self and Others (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969).

18. Hannah Green, I Never Promised You a Rose Garden (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1964).

19. Carl R. Rogers, Becoming Partners: Marriage and Its Alternatives (New York: Delacorte Press, 1972).

20. May Sarton, Crucial Conversations (New York: Norton Publishing Company, 1975).